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### Power, norms and theory. A meta-political inquiry

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## Power, norms and theory. A meta-political inquiry

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Realism criticizes the idea, central to what may be called ‘the priority view’, that philosophy has the task of imposing *from the outside* general norms of morality or standards of reasonableness on politics understood as the domain of power. According to realism, political philosophy must reveal the specific standards internal to the political practice of handling power appropriately and as it develops in actual circumstances. Framed in those terms, the debate evokes the idea that political power itself is lacking normativity until such time as norms are devised that govern its use. In contrast, this essay identifies a normative dimension *internal* to (the conquest and exercise of) power. Power depends on recognition and support in the form of belief. This dependence explains how an interest in power introduces a responsiveness to normative considerations into the domain of politics.

**Keywords:** political normativity; realism; violence; belief; reasonableness; truth; time

There is mounting criticism of a certain conception of the very undertaking of philosophy that underlies much work in contemporary political philosophy. Following such critics as Bernard Williams, Raymond Geuss or Glen Newey, I label this conception the ‘priority view’. The priority view, explicitly or implicitly, represents the idea that philosophy ought to create ‘the framework within which the political is played out’, (Newey 2001, p. 37, cf. 35, Galston 2010, pp. 386–390). Philosophy must discover, in other words, general norms of reasonableness or morality and then apply these to politics understood as the terrain where people fight for the opportunity to exercise power. To this conception of political philosophy’s role, it is often objected that politics must not be *reduced* to the domain of power. Politics is a practice defined by rules and standards specific to the proper or desirable conquest and use of power, and a distinctive kind of goods (such as protection from violence). Norms or values need not be imported ‘into’ politics. Politics, correctly understood, includes all the norms and values that we can *realistically* expect to be effective in social reality (Philp 2007, p. 52). For highlighting the reality of politics, many critics of the priority view are known as ‘realists’.<sup>1</sup>

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This essay does not offer arguments for or against either side of this debate (which will be described in a little more detail in the following section). Rather, it points to a dimension of politics that risks being overlooked both by the priority view and its realist opponents. Their debate turns on the nature or status of the norms and values determining how we should conquer and exercise political power. As such, it suggests that conquering and exercising power is, prescindig from instrumental or strategic rationality and the contributions of philosophy, devoid of normativity.<sup>2</sup> This essay aims to contest this suggestion by exploring a normative dimension *internal* to the appropriation of power. In this sense, this essay is a contribution to the perennial debate on the relationship between philosophy as the voice of reason or morality and politics as the realm of power. Yet, it also aims to contribute to a long-overdue inquiry into the terms we employ in thinking about politics. It is therefore not only of concern to philosophers.

One obvious factor is that the very terms ‘politics’ and ‘political’ are used in different ways by philosophers. John Rawls has given wide currency to a specific sense of ‘political’. ‘Political’ (as opposed to ‘comprehensive’) principles establish a stable and morally acceptable basis for social union and define an exercise of political power that is ‘proper and hence justifiable’ (Rawls 1996, p. 217). Simultaneously, however, Rawls uses the word in a connected yet broader sense to identify a particular relationship between people. The ‘political’ relation involves people (1) who together constitute a society in which they lead a complete life and (2) exercise coercive power over one another backed by the government’s use of force.

As Rawls notes, ‘in a constitutional regime the special feature of the political relation is that political power is ultimately the power of [...] free and equal citizens as a collective body’ (Rawls 1996, p. 217). His project is to clarify this special feature required by democracy, and the moral values of freedom and equality. Certainly, no contemporary realist rejects democracy or such values as freedom and equality (Sleat 2013, p. 3). Nevertheless many realists distance themselves from Rawls as the prime example of the priority view. The reason is that they seek, in contrast to Rawls (on their interpretation), an understanding of democracy, freedom, equality or any other (ethically) desirable feature of the political relation that is ‘internal’, i.e. ‘extracted’ from the political relation itself (Hall *in press*, pp. 3–4, cf. Rossi 2012, p. 157, Jubb and Rossi 2015, *forthcoming*, Rossi and Sleat 2014, sec. 2.1).

This essay is sympathetic to realism, if only for its endeavour to draw attention to the political relation. Nevertheless, its aim differs from that of *both* the priority view and realism. I do not so much look for ways of going beyond the very notion of power in order to find (internal or external) norms or values to make that relation more justifiable in the sense of more just, moral, desirable, less bad, etc. Rather, I want to concentrate on the nature of the political relation itself. To understand the political relation is to see the normative dimension introduced by the very fact that it is the relation between

people wielding *political* power over one another. My purpose is elucidatory or ‘hermeneutic’ rather than prescriptive.

For this purpose, a rough characterization of the political relation in the two dimensions indicated by Rawls suffices. (1) A ‘political’ relation involves people exerting power over one another. ‘Power’ is understood here in the restricted sense of power to coerce, to obtain actions through the use (or the threat) of sanctions, particularly physical violence. (2) But not all power is political. Politics establishes the terms of social unity. It is ‘the art of unification’ that joins people into a community to a sufficient extent for the question what is to be done in society to make sense and to require some answer (Walzer 1967, 194); (Galston 2010, p. 390). An issue (about media ethics, say) becomes ‘political’, when it becomes a potential object of *collective* decision-making (of law or policy). In a first formulation, my purpose therefore is to explore the normativity implied by the very relation that is instantiated when ‘political agents’ have (coercive) power over ‘subjects’ as a consequence of the formation and execution of collective decisions in society.

A further complication arises because the meaning of ‘normativity’ is also controversial. In order to sidestep controversy, let us grant that a normative approach presupposes two things. First, it requires that, when comparing situations or actions (including those that are possible, envisaged, etc.), we do not merely observe differences: some cases are judged *deficient*, cf. (Korsgaard 2009, p. 34). It is characteristic of a normative account that it yields a special class of comparative judgements that I will call ‘corrective remarks’. These corrective remarks, in turn, characterize performances as falling short of a model, a standard or violating a rule or a norm.<sup>3</sup> (In the two following sections, we only consider corrective remarks with respect to actions).

Second, a truly normative account also explains why the relevant corrective remarks *matter*. Corrective remarks are *reason-giving* statements or corrective reason statements, explaining why the agent should (or why it is good for the agent to) alter her behaviour or performance (Finlay 2010, 2012). Normativity is not wholly contingent on the agent’s judgements or attitudes. So a complete account of normativity explains in what sense it is non-arbitrary or non-optional, and why it yields true corrective statements an agent cannot ignore or reject (Copp 2005, 195). A theory of instrumental rationality, for instance, points out that disregarding certain corrective remarks about the options chosen decreases the probability of realizing one’s preferences. (In what follows, the terms ‘corrective remarks’ and ‘corrective reason-statements’ are used interchangeably).

Section 1 details the debate between the priority view and realism, and clarifies the different senses in which we can say that normativity is introduced into the political relation ‘from the outside’. Spelling out the metaphor of ‘internal’ vs. ‘external’ forms of political normativity helps to state the thesis of this essay more precisely. Sections 2 and 3 scrutinize the political relation and explain how coercive power depends on belief. Because of this

dependence, political agents cannot be completely indifferent to normative considerations. An analysis of legitimacy is beyond the scope of this essay. However, I will briefly indicate in the concluding Section 4 how a ‘power-based form’ of normativity connects to an interpretation of legitimacy that avoids the priority view without collapsing legitimacy into mere agreement with those in power. (For the purposes of this essay, ‘legitimacy’ should be understood as political legitimacy, i.e. the entitlement to coercive power). As will become apparent, understanding this form of political normativity demands bringing certain temporal considerations to the fore.

### 1. Realism vs. the priority view

Space precludes the possibility of discussing the various positions for and against the priority view.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is useful to itemize the fundamental traits of both the priority view and realism. This also serves to give a precise meaning to the claim, argued for in the following sections, that there is a form of normativity *internal* to power itself that is overlooked both by the priority view and its realist critics.

The priority view consists of four fundamental ideas:

- (1) The starting point is a conception of practical reason. ‘A philosophical model [...] purporting to explain the phenomena [...] is] taken to [...] be the basis for an essentially normative account of how ideally rational political agents would act’ (Newey 2001, p. 132, cf. Mouffe 2005, pp. 83–86, Geuss 2005a, p. 1, Galston 2010, p. 390).
- (2) There is an *epistemological* understanding of (moral or political) theory: the conception of practical reason takes the form of a *theory* justifying an explicit set of rules that tell us how to reach reasonable agreement or a list of criteria that identify reasonable solutions that would settle an issue. The epistemological theory singles out the (most) reasonable solution or a (restricted) family of reasonable resolutions. Remaining disagreements are merely verbal or temporal (Compare Rorty 1979, 319). Often the principles of practical reason are arguably implicit in actual social and political practice. The social *origin* of these principles notwithstanding, it is philosophical theory, rationally (re)constructing actual practice in reflective equilibrium or through transcendental analysis that *justifies* them as reasonable and ultimately determines political reasonableness.
- (3) Most realists focus on moralist versions of the priority view restricting practical reasonableness to morality and entailing the priority of *moral* philosophy. For purposes of this essay, however, the content of practical reason is secondary. It is the claim of the epistemological theory to determine what an ideally reasonable agent would do or think that is crucial. For this claim results in a particular view of coercive power

and legitimacy; the legitimacy of an exercise of power requires that we are able to show its reasonable acceptability in advance and on the basis of independent criteria validated by the epistemological theory. Even if some specific decisions are not sanctioned by theory but result from existing power relations (through bargaining and compromise, for instance), such ‘autonomous’ use of power is reasonable and legitimate to the extent that it remains within limits validated by the criteria of reasonableness.

- (4) The priority view has a remarkable temporal dimension. Norms of reasonableness are to direct political decisions and/or the exercise of power (Galston 2010, pp. 386–390). So the norms and the theory validating them must *precede* the decisions and the exercise of power; ‘philosophy operates *prior* to politics’ (Newey 2001, pp. 7–8, 31, 50, 51–52), providing a theoretically validated framework within which politics has to run its course (determining when compromise or bargaining are acceptable, for instance). Even if *specific* decisions are left to the discretion of the citizens, theory forwards rules for the decision-making process or standards for the assessment of outcomes prior to politics.

One consequence of the priority view is a rather *static* conception of reasonable politics. All the major elements of political philosophy – the criteria for reasonable acceptability, any outline of a basic structure for society or catalogue of basic rights – are supposedly entailed by the truth of the epistemological theory. But truth is a *stable* property (of propositions or theories) that cannot be lost (Wright 1995, pp. 215–216), implying that any reasonable politics derived from a true theory is essentially unchanging. I will return to the temporal aspects of the priority view in the last section.

Our immediate concern, however, is the general understanding of normativity implied by the priority view. It is unquestionably *political* in form. The conception of practical reason yields corrective remarks that criticize actual circumstances or behaviour in society and show how to rectify them. The epistemological theory, moreover, purportedly demonstrates that there are no good reasons for disregarding these remarks. The priority view therefore presents a normative interpretation of social union as arising from a consensus that is ‘reasonable’ as explained by the epistemological theory.

However, it is precisely this understanding of *one* dimension of the political relation that undermines the priority view’s ability to tell us anything of consequence about the *other* dimension. The vision of political union on terms proven to be reasonably acceptable to all citizens, realists allege, underplays the ‘uncontroversial, empirical’ fact that ‘politics is characterised by endemic disagreement’, (Newey 2001, pp. 7–8, 31, 50, 51–52, (Galston 2010, pp. 396–397, Hall 2013, p. 8–10). As a result, the priority view has no *fundamental* need for coercive power to impose decisions against opposition or at least it

confines its legitimate exercise to the domain *defined* by reasonably agreeable principles (Newey 2001, pp. 7–8, 31, 50, 51–52, Geuss 2005a, p. 1, Sleat 2013, chap. 1, Rossi and Sleat 2014, sec. 2.1 and 2.2). Dismissing disagreement, conflict and the use of power as theoretically insignificant or temporary effects of unreasonableness (or relegating it to non-ideal theory) arguably represents a ‘desire to evade, displace, or escape from politics’, (Newey 2001, pp. 2–3, 7–8, 28, 56, Geuss 2005a, p. 1, Philp 2007, 60–61). Not surprisingly, the priority view has been criticized for presenting utterly unfeasible political ideals and lacking practical import (Philp 2007, 59, Bellamy 2010, Rossi 2010, 506–507, Erman and Möller *in press*, 4).

There is therefore a non-metaphorical sense in which the priority view expects philosophy to impose *from the outside* the aims to be achieved or the norms to be respected by politics, as the sphere of conflict and coercive power. For the priority view relies solely on the epistemological theory to provide principles that are reasonably agreeable to all and cannot, in principle, see any need for coercion to impose them.

Most versions of realism reject this idea that political philosophy can take coercion to be in principle redundant. Nevertheless, they do not abandon the project of a normative account of politics altogether but offer, for example, interesting theories of political value, virtue or legitimacy (Philp 2010, 471–475).<sup>5</sup> The specifically *political* nature of these accounts lies in the fact that, rather than idealizing conflict and power away, they try to respond to the harms, evils and suffering that so often flow from conflict and the use of coercive power in imposing social unity. In addition, they explicitly make allowance for ‘the impact’ that the realities of power itself has ‘on the development and realization of values and outcomes’ (Philp 2007, p. 3).

In particular, one starting point for an ‘internal’ normative account as proposed by some realists are two unquestionable convictions: (1) There is a difference between power and violence or between political rule and domination (understood as rule by threat of violence), see e.g. (Philp 2007, chap. 3, Sleat 2013, p. 60). And (2) a crucial ‘good’ of politics is to limit violence as much as possible, see e.g. (Mouffe 2005, pp. 101–102). (This in turn may require legitimacy, since perhaps only a legitimate order guarantees lasting security.) For instance, Bernard Williams, one of the first and most influential realists, saw the problem of the reduction of violence and terror as ‘the first question of politics’<sup>6</sup>:

The situation of one lot of people terrorizing another lot of people is not per se a political situation: it is, rather, the situation which the existence of the political is in the first place supposed to alleviate (Williams 2005, p. 5).

In particular, a legitimate political order must solve the first question of politics without itself relying on terror and violence:



if the power of one lot of people over another is to represent a solution [...] something has to be said to explain [this and this explanation] cannot simply be an account of successful domination. It has to be something in the mode of justifying explanation or legitimation. (Williams 2005, p. 5, cf. Philp 2007, p. 73, Hall 2013, pp. 6–7, Jubb and Rossi 2015, forthcoming)

This ‘Basic Legitimation Demand’ is clearly a normative principle, or at least a principle introducing the very idea of normativity; it is the ‘axiom that might does not imply right, that power does itself not justify’ (Ibid).

As announced, I do not want to intervene in the debate between the priority view and realists such as Williams nor take a stand on the nature of appropriately political norms or values. Rather my aim is to understand the political relation itself. For this purpose, I will in the next section adopt two insights from Williams but also depart in a crucial way from his position. I will elaborate on the distinction between violence and power underlying the ‘first political question’, and on the connections between power and justifying explanation as highlighted by the Basic Legitimation Demand. Regrettably, two aspects of Williams’ account obscure the real import of the second point. First, Williams seems uncertain about whether the Basic Legitimation Demand is to some extent a *moral* principle.<sup>7</sup> Second, Williams understands the connection between power and justification in terms of *legitimacy*<sup>8</sup> (in terms, moreover, of the singular issue of the legitimacy of non-liberal regimes). In contrast, the following section will show that the connection between power and justification is crucial not in the first place to legitimacy but to the very *existence* of political power; independently of issues of morality or legitimacy, power itself needs words of justification. I will return to legitimacy briefly in the last section.

Likewise, there is no denying that reducing violence and conflict is of prime moral or ethical importance. Nevertheless, in the next section I will also argue that the distinction between violence and power constitutes a *fact* about politics. It is this *fact* that by itself, independently of its undeniable moral or ethical significance, makes it unadvisable for a political agent, however morally insensitive, to ignore certain corrective remarks.

I take Williams as illustrative in a general way of many realist approaches to politics. This suggests a sense in which realism remains external to the political relation. To be sure, in so far as realists avoid the claim that their theories are acceptable to anyone reflecting reasonably on our political condition and in so far as they recognize that the content of even political legitimacy, value and virtue is controversial, realism cannot be seen as external in the same sense as the priority view. There is no presumption of consensus; realism is conscious of the decisive role of the law and institutions in *enforcing* a particular interpretation of legitimacy or virtuous political conduct (Philp 2012, pp. 17–18, Sleat 2013, pp. 12–14).

Yet realism is external to the political relation in the sense that it does not explain why its fundamental notions, such as the distinction between violence

and power or the connection between power and justification, matter for someone interested in power.<sup>9</sup> This is not to deny the importance of realist normative accounts nor their properly political nature. But granted that ‘political theorists have [...] to argue about the ideas and values that politicians ought to draw on in responding to the world’ (Philp 2007, pp. 87–93, Philp 2010, p. 482), there is a prior question: in what sense is politics, as the domain in which political power is wielded, hospitable to normative standards at all? Answering this question requires an understanding of what is distinctive about political power,<sup>10</sup> which in turn implies an analysis of the political relation as a relation of *power*, a discussion I reserve for the next section. This will require that I give some indications of how power and violence are distinct (irrespective of the moral significance of this distinction).

In analysing the relation between people exercising power over another, I will make recourse to two somewhat artificial assumptions. First, I will put the many concerns that political agents undoubtedly have to one side and consider them merely as *political* agents interested in exercising power for as long as possible. Second, I will assume a strict division between political agents interested in power and those who are subjected to it. We will present ‘political agents’ and ‘subjects’ as two distinct groups, ignoring the myriad of interdependencies which power creates in any given society. To be sure, we hope for virtuous politicians concerned about other things than merely perpetuating their own power and we design institutions in order to balance their ambitions for power. But, again, these concerns and institutions are not the issue here. The aim is to understand the political relation and the extent to which it is responsive to normative considerations. For this purpose, my artificial and somewhat bleak picture of the political relation is of some use.

Accordingly, the following sections will answer two questions. (1) Does the description of a political agent as solely concerned with coercive power make it true that she cannot ignore or dismiss (a) certain (class of) corrective reason-giving assertions explaining why she should act in a certain way? Are there corrective statements that an agent cannot put to one side except by rejecting a description of herself as a political agent interested in power? (2) And, of course, what does it mean that she ‘cannot’?

## 2. Power and recognition

Certain facts about coercive power, as it has been understood by authors from diverse philosophical and political backgrounds such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort and John Searle, are responsible for establishing a form of normativity internal to power itself. And it is this normative dimension which I intend to further analyse in Sections 2 and 3. In this section, the word ‘violence’ is used in its primary sense of physical assault; later on we will consider more subtle forms of ‘structural’ violence as well.

It is convenient to use the elegant ‘formal analysis’ by Searle. On that analysis, power arises out of what he calls the construction of social reality (Searle 2010, p. 201). Social facts are instituted by the collective creation of status functions. The clearest case of this is the assignment of a status function to an object or a person by virtue of a ‘status function declaration’. As a result, that person or object is enabled to perform certain functions (Searle 1995, pp. 39, 44, 46; Searle 2006, p. 17). For instance,

while a knife has a certain physical structure that enables it to cut, a piece of paper in my hand, unlike the knife in my pocket, does indeed perform a function of money, but [...] not in virtue of its physical structure but in virtue of collective attitudes.<sup>11</sup>

More abstractly, ‘the logical form’ of such status function declarations is:

(SD) We [...] make it the case by Declaration that a status function Y exists in context C, (Searle 2010, p. 201), the label (SD) is added.

By collectively recognizing status functions (by assigning the status of ‘money’ or the status of ‘political leader’), we create and then grant power. For we create and accept certain rights, obligations, responsibilities, duties, entitlements, authorizations, permissions, requirements (Searle 1995, pp. 39–40, Searle 2006, p. 17).

Searle’s notion of ‘power’ is broader than coercive power. It is the power to do something or to prevent someone else from doing something, cf. (Morris 1987). Accordingly, the propositional content of status-function declarations creating power is partly that (S does A). So the recognition of the status function creating power is of the form:

(PC) We collectively recognize (status function Y exists in C and because S has relation R with Y (S has power (S does A))) (Searle, 1995, 104–105, Searle 2010, pp. 100–102), label added.

‘S’ can be replaced by an expression referring to a group or a single individual and ‘A’ by the name of an action including such negatives as refraining.

With regard to our analysis of the political relation and its internal normativity, four applications or extensions of Searle’s analysis (as such not highlighted by him) are noteworthy:

*First*, Searle’s formal tools articulate a specific *political* use of violence and power. Political violence differs not only in scale from interpersonal, face-to-face violence (e.g. a mugger beating up a victim). Distinctive for political violence is that the physical acts of violence cannot be perpetrated by those ultimately responsible (even if they do personally commit violence). Violence must be delegated to specialized personnel (we cannot ourselves clear the streets of protesters, we send out the police). This indicates, as PC conveys, that in politics

‘power [...] is the primary and predominant factor’ (Arendt 1970, p. 52) in the sense that *political* violence is only at the disposal of those with power. In PC, ‘A’ may be instantiated by some act of violence (‘sends out the police’). The violent act is then introduced within the scope of the power operator ‘S has power’. PC expresses the fact that, even though violence and coercion through the threat of violence may be necessary, the specialists of violence, such as ‘police forces, armies, and other forms of organized coercion are themselves systems of status functions’ (Searle 2010, p. 201). What is more; in PC, the power operator is governed by a status function Y, and the relation R between Y and S that in their turn figure within the scope of the recognition operator. The systems of status functions specializing in violence and coercion cannot in turn be created by violence; they depend on recognition (the armed forces accepting S as their commander).

In brief, Searle’s formulas articulate the relation between political power and violence; in politics, power 1) is primary to violence and 2) derives from acceptance, compare (Arendt 1970, p. 52). Coercive power and violence often go together, it is true, but in politics power should not be understood as *merely* arising out of the use of violence (‘Power grows out of the barrel of a gun’) (Searle 2010, pp. 164–166). In this sense, the distinction between power and violence, although a distinction with normative significance, is not itself normative; it follows from facts about social reality.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, PC also expresses that (coercive) power, however autonomous or absolute, eventually languishes without recognition or acceptance.

The *second* thing to note, however, is that PC is *silent* about what motivates recognition. People may create a republic or elect a president for any reason whatsoever (for promoting their survival, their privileges, their interests, their values or their moral convictions). Nor does PC clarify the relation between the people granting power (the ‘we’ in the formula) and the people subjected to that power. PC applies to one group granting the power to use violence against another group for purely selfish reasons.

PC tells us no more than these two facts: in order to be able to use political violence an agent has to have power and he or she ultimately owes that power to the recognition of some other people. There must be some groups in society that, by virtue of their support, create the political agent’s power and whose motives for doing so are other than fear of violence generated by this agent. Searle’s formulas are therefore compatible with situations where legitimacy is ‘not in play’, where (clearly illegitimate) domination is established by violence (a *coup d’état*). However, they highlight three points: (1) domination, even though created through violence, requires status functions and therefore power to *endure* and (2) status functions and power are brought into being by recognition, even if it is recognition by small groups in society (the army or the police, an elite, a revolutionary vanguard). What is more, (3) the connection between power and a form of recognition that is not enforced by violence suggests (but perhaps does not establish) that power increases with the number of people giving their recognition (regardless of what motivates

this recognition). Politics, in other words, may be simultaneously the art of uniting people and of conquering power.

It follows, *third*, that we must expand our picture of the political relation (without reducing its artificiality). The artificially strict distinction between those exercising power and those subjected to it might encourage us to think of the political relation as dyadic. Our elaboration on SD and PC indicates that the political relation takes at least three arguments: there are political *agents* exercising power over *subjects* and the agents' *supporters* whose recognition creates the power. (The two last arguments may be instantiated by the same people; in principle, that is what happens in a representative democracy.)

Taking these three points together, *fourth*, suggests an outline of how we can think of the institution of social union in a way that does not ignore the role of (coercive) power. What unites people politically and, consequently, what ultimately institutes a political community need not be reasonable agreement on the principles of social union, nor even general acceptance of the legitimacy of the rulers; it may just be acceptance by certain groups in society. Political unity is established, let us say, when a course for society (principles, laws, policies) is enforced; this course either wins my support or is imposed upon me without my consent if backed by sufficient power (and perhaps by violence dependent on power). But even in the second case, this power instituting social unity rests on acceptance, even if it is the acceptance by others in society that I do not share. Of course, most actual situations will be an inextricable amalgam of both cases.

Searle's analysis and its extensions point to a dimension of the political relation that is undeniably *normative*. For it shows that there are corrective statements that no political agent ambitious for power can ignore. These are both of a general nature and of a specific nature that depends on the specific support from which the agent derives her power.

The general remarks are constituted by Searle's analysis and the conclusions that we draw from it. A political agent cannot very well ignore corrective remarks that remind her of the distinction between violence and power; she cannot forget that the use of violence requires power and that power depends on recognition and possibly increases with the number of people she can unite in support behind her. Moreover, the necessity of that support for the preservation of her power implies that the political agent cannot (openly) disregard the corrective remarks that influence that support. This is the 'cannot' of instrumental rationality.

However, the normativity internal to the political *relation* cannot be reduced to instrumental rationality. For that relation is not limited to political agents and subjects; even if we imagine political agents to be merely instrumentally rational in trying to obtain power, they may find it impossible to ignore corrective remarks that – depending on the motives of their supporters (which may include a concern for justice, for instance) – may well be of a moral or ethical nature.<sup>13</sup> Depending on the political circumstances (the convictions of certain

political agents' supporters), the ambition for power and the concerns underlying ethical or moral accounts of politics may connect; political agents, even though personally unconcerned about ethics, cannot be publicly believed to be indifferent to political justice, legitimacy or virtue if such matters are of concern to their supporters. Here, I submit, lies the anchorage point within the political relation for such normative accounts; normative accounts can influence political behaviour by influencing those whose support grants power.

The primacy of power over violence and its dependence on recognition results in there being corrective remarks giving reasons to act in a certain way that someone ambitious for power cannot ignore (not even *in foro interno*) and others she cannot publicly set to one side and which may include moral or ethical remarks.

The normativity that is indicated by the sensitivity for such remarks, is itself independent of moral or ethical concerns. For Searle's analysis and our conclusions do not rely on moral or ethical considerations. The distinction between violence and power is of crucial moral significance but here does not have a moral character. To repeat, a distinction may be morally crucial without being exclusively based on moral factors nor having only moral relevance (such as the distinction between my children and other children). In contrast to Williams and following Searle, moreover, we see the dependence of power on recognition not as a requirement for legitimacy but as a precondition for the very *existence* of power. In any case, SD and PC do not impose conditions on recognition. They only stipulate, through the primacy of power over violence, that not *all* 'support' for those in power is acquiescence induced by violence and terror. Recognition must not have characteristics (such as reasonableness) that make it a plausible source of legitimacy.

The most important argument to deny that we are *importing* extraneous (normative) considerations into the political relation is that our analysis speaks to the actual motives of political agents. For it spells out the preconditions of what political agents are by hypothesis exclusively interested in – the *political* conditions of the use of power and violence. The primacy of power over violence and its dependence on recognition follows from the fact that *political* violence must be organized and *political* power therefore cannot be obtained by means of *individual* acts of violence (as may be the case with the school bully's power, for instance).

In that sense, the primacy of power and its dependence on recognition constitute *facts* about the political relation. So their main warrant lies in their explanatory virtue; some modifications in the power structure can only be made sense of by acknowledging these facts of power. Exhilarating examples are revolutionary situations in which the dictatorship suddenly breaks down and the means of violence become useless, '[w]here commands are no longer obeyed (the army and the police forces no longer prepared to use their weapons)' (Arendt 1970, p. 52). As these claims express facts about our political condition, a philosophical or theoretical argument in favour of them is probably not

possible. That does not mean, however, that they are mere assumptions; one need only point to political events throughout history as a way of justifying them.

What stands out, at the end of this section, are the significant limitations on political theory. Theoretical analysis does not decree what our reasons for supporting political agents should be. Nothing is said about that support being reasonable. The considerations inspiring political support can be silly. In other words, ‘recognition’ has merely an attributional sense (recognizing as) here and not a fact-reporting sense (recognizing that); I can (publicly) recognize you *as* the rightful heir to the throne (because it serves my interests), while (privately) recognizing *that* your claim is weak in law.<sup>14</sup>

To return to Williams’ ‘axiom’ that might is not right, this section does not tell us where the distinction lies. Worse, power need not derive from a concern about what is right. However, neither does the section reiterate the trivial fact that people are able to distinguish between what they think is right and what those in power are up to. It shows the political relevance of this distinction. When support *does* derive from concerns about what is right (when rulers profess to be or to do right), political agents cannot publicly make light of corrective remarks about how their actions measure up to what their supporters believe is right.

### 3. Belief

Power is created and granted through the recognition of status function declarations. This recognition may be inspired by various motives, by desires, fears, interests, etc. However, belief appears to be central to all these various kinds of thoughts, (Davidson 1984, pp. 156–157); in order to desire or to fear you must believe a lot of things. Belief being central to the recognition of a status function, power is dependent on support in opinion or belief. We cannot understand the political relation without imputing certain beliefs to supporters whose recognition creates political agents’ power. (‘Belief’ is here conceived of sufficiently broadly to include moral or normative beliefs).

In this Section 1 will show how this further refines our picture of the political relation and the normativity entailed by the quest for power. As used here in a political context, the notion of belief retains its ordinary epistemic meaning, but I will only assume the most platitudinous aspects of this folk-psychological notion of ‘belief’. Foremost among these is the fact that, as Williams puts it, ‘beliefs aim at truth’ (where truth includes moral or normative truth). Some beliefs are false, but there is ‘a conceptual link between a belief and its truth’, (Williams 1973, p. 145, cf. 136, cf. Heyse 1998, pp. 418–422). That is, it is impossible to believe that *p*, while consciously acknowledging that *p* is not true. This wholly generic dimension of belief so affects the political relation that there may be additional corrective remarks that a political agent finds impossible to ignore.



The connection between power and belief aiming at truth may revive the aspirations of theory in political philosophy. This may happen in two ways. In an ambitious version, the priority view and, in particular, its epistemological component would be resurrected as a theory of *true* belief. If the epistemological theory were to establish standards not of practical reason but of truth (including moral truth), it would determine what to believe in politics. Philosophy could formulate corrective remarks that no believer aiming at truth could ignore and so, once again, direct political action.

In a more modest variant, theory, now in the guise of a theory of *genuine* belief, promises an answer to a possible complaint about the conclusions of the previous section. The complaint is that to restrict violence to physical assault is to over-simplify. Subtle, non-physical forms of (structural) violence shape beliefs or affect the material conditions in which beliefs are formed. We cannot rule out a priori that the recognition of status functions is engineered. Recognition might be inspired by an attitude that is produced in a way that precludes it from being a genuine belief. In such cases, the complaint concludes, the distinction between power and violence, the dependence of power on recognition and belief and therefore the whole account of a power-based normativity collapses.<sup>15</sup> Faced with this complaint, the idea of a ‘test’, of a theory stipulating conditions of genuine belief is alluring. For even if such a theory would not tell us what to believe, it would allow outside observers to identify situations where what appears to be power supported by beliefs is actually a form of structural violence inducing acquiescence by shaping ‘beliefs’, compare (Sleat 2013, pp. 118–120).

An epistemological theory of true belief or a doxastic theory of genuine belief would significantly enlarge the scope of the normative dimension internal to the political relation. For the previous section had nothing to say about what beliefs should motivate political support. Corrective remarks by ‘outsiders’ who (1) are not involved in the relation and (2) who disagree with the beliefs motivating our support, are immaterial. By contrast, a theory validating criteria of true or genuine belief would prove the pertinence of the corrective remarks it inspires.

I will not argue here against epistemological or doxastic theories of true or genuine belief. Even if the history of epistemology warrants pessimism, I grant that such theories are not impossible. However, Donald Davidson argues famously that an alternative for such theories lies in an account of ‘of how to relate truth to human interests (desires, beliefs, intentions)’ (Davidson 1990, p. 280). I will extend Davidson’s suggestion to politics and examine the normativity internal to power resulting from the fact that power presupposes belief aiming at truth. Corrective remarks made by people external to the political relation prove to be relevant, but not in the way envisaged by epistemological or doxastic theories.



In order to show this, it is sufficient to elaborate platitudinously upon Williams' slogan that beliefs aim at truth. Three consequences follow from it, for which I cannot argue here but which are hardly controversial.

- (1) Involuntariness of belief: it is impossible to decide at will to believe. I cannot know to have acquired a certain state of mind in a manner unconnected to its truth and 'then, in full consciousness regard this as a belief of mine, i.e. something I take to be true' (Williams 1973, p. 148). Accordingly, there is no sense in trying to force or bribe me into believing something. Of course, I sometimes acquire beliefs in ways unrelated to their truth (hypnotism, drugs, propaganda) but the causal history of such beliefs must be hidden from me (propaganda cannot admit to being propaganda; it must claim to be the truth), cf. (McMyler 2011).
- (2) Vulnerability of belief: we cannot consciously acknowledge not having good reasons for our beliefs. People do not always have (good) reasons for their beliefs, but if they have reasons for (changing) their beliefs they must think that those reasons justify the beliefs. When confronted with objections to a belief *p* or to the reasons used to justify *p*, that we judge, by our current standards, to be convincing, we must reasonably give it up. Such objections or corrective remarks explaining why we, given that we want to believe what is true, should give up a belief, may always be forthcoming. Beliefs are only held provisionally, (Heysse 1998, pp. 419–420).
- (3) Universality of the source of convincing objections: in the absence of an epistemological theory that proves certain beliefs to be reasonably acceptable to all, we have no basis to expect universal consent with our beliefs. Yet, there is a universal dimension to the normativity of belief. For convincing objections may be voiced by anyone; a foolish or ignorant person may speak words of wisdom. Even when we deem a person's judgement unfit or when circumstances (making evidence unavailable) render it unfit and we therefore do not expect or seek her agreement, she may (perhaps unwittingly) formulate objections that are considered sound by ourselves or by others whose judgement we do value and whose agreement we do seek (Heysse 1998, pp. 424–427). In other words, there is no predicting the source of corrective remarks that we will find unable to ignore as believers of *p*.

These three aspects of the normativity of belief apply to the beliefs of supporters granting power to a political agent and so clarify the normativity of power. 'Belief' is a normative notion in so far as beliefs are vulnerable to objections or corrective remarks. Even in the absence of an epistemological theory of true belief, the evaluation of a belief and of reasons justifying a belief is not limited to the believers themselves. To the extent that power

depends on these beliefs, power absorbs the normativity of belief. In particular, power becomes infected by the vulnerability to objections characteristic of belief and shares its subsequently provisional character. Moreover, convincing objections can come from anywhere, also from parties who are (for religious, ethnic, ideological or other reasons) officially excluded from political debate. In politics people who, ostensibly, are (thought) not (to be) involved, may formulate objections undermining the beliefs from which power derives.

As a result, we do not need criteria for genuine beliefs in order to uphold the distinction between power and (structural) violence. It suffices to refer to actual historical cases where victims of structural violence have engaged in self-reflection (such as that which preceded the struggle against colonization). During this process of self-reflection, subjects turn to asking about the sources of the 'beliefs' justifying the existing power structure and may arrive at certain conclusions about the beliefs' causal history (for instance that the sole sources of justification of the power structure are those who benefit from it). By virtue of the involuntariness of belief, this causal history constitutes a corrective remark that merely by becoming known undermines the beliefs in question. Such critical self-reflection may be inspired from the outside. However, only the subjects' own conclusion about their beliefs is decisive; the distinction between power and violence does not require *criteria* of genuine belief (Williams 2002, pp. 227–229).

In the appropriate circumstances, a political agent, because of her desire for power, has no other option but to respond to corrective remarks about beliefs that have come from unexpected sources. Even in the absence of theoretical standards of truth or genuine belief, power itself, by virtue of its dependence on belief, introduces influences that break open the political relation. Consequently, we must adjust our picture of that relation once again. Even if we restrict the political relation to political agents, the subjects of coercive power and the supporters who create power through recognition, we cannot deny the influence of 'outsiders' who by their remarks succeed in affecting that recognition. (Which explains why those holding power are tempted to block communication with 'outsiders'). Precisely this influence of 'outsiders' indicates that politically effective judgement is not merely contingent on the attitudes of those involved in the political relation (political agents, subjects and supporters).

That the normativity under discussion in this section is internal to power itself is revealed by another aspect of the folk-psychological notion of belief: 'although the most straightforward, simple and elementary expression of a belief [...] is an assertion, the assertion of  $p$  is neither a necessary nor [...] a sufficient condition of having the belief that  $p$ ' (Williams 1973, p. 148); speakers may be insincere or unforthcoming in expressing their beliefs. Talk of beliefs aiming at truth does not imply that the speaker *intends* to speak the truth. Truth is attributed by a *listener* deciding whether to believe what the speaker is saying. Whether the speaker wants to speak the truth is a question that often cannot be answered for lack of information.<sup>16</sup> Pointing to the

normativity introduced into politics by beliefs aiming at truth is not to imagine all political assertions to be truthful. It is not to forget that politics consists of a struggle for power during which conflicts of interest are contested. The predicate 'is true' crops up the moment this struggle is fought using arguments to induce beliefs in others.

More positively, political debate offers those ambitious for power the prospects of increasing and solidifying their power by providing opportunities for convincing potential supporters. But there is a price to pay: political agents must deliver themselves to a process that participants can accept as suitable for forming beliefs. As a result, their propositions may meet with criticism, their arguments with objections. In this forum, their propositions and arguments may be rejected and their power thereby diminished. 'The discourse of power', in other words, is subjected to 'the power of discourse' (Lefort 1978, pp. 489–490).

From the perspective of political agents interested in power, it is clearly vital to *enjoy* recognition and to *have* the support of opinion; political agents need not be interested in the truth of the beliefs from which their power derives, nor in the rational standing of the arguments supporting these beliefs. But beliefs, we now understand, are never merely a factual matter of *having* beliefs. Not only will those interested in power often (at least hypocritically) have to pretend to value truth and good arguments. Crucially, their supporters will be motivated by beliefs and committed to their truth. (In their *supporters'* opinion, if not in their own, those in power must *truly* serve whatever they claim to serve). Accordingly, political agents cannot be known to ignore corrective remarks completely when they raise the question of truth or rational standing.

#### 4. Implications: legitimacy and time

One particular normative dimension of politics derives from the fact that power depends on support in belief. The analysis in this essay, obviously, does not imply that justice, equality, freedom, political virtue or any other topic of political philosophy is irrelevant for our social and political lives. Philosophers rightly often criticize society and formulate morally interesting recommendations. Indeed, the analysis shows that philosophical considerations have their place in the political relation, as they may influence beliefs motivating support for political agents. If not in doubt about the truth and the political expediency of their views, philosophers must jump into the fray and try to win over as many people as possible, thereby changing the relations of power (Claassen 2011). An interesting example of this is Matt Sleat's *realist* version of liberalism that explicitly recognizes the 'conflictual nature of politics' and accepts that liberalism is 'a form of domination vis-à-vis those that reject it' (Sleat 2013, p. 7, cf. Ch 6 and 7), (Rossi and Sleat 2014, sec. 3). Political theory is now understood as consisting of *political* propositions (vying for power in the sense that we seek support for them and envisage their being imposed against opposition).

In concluding this essay, I want to indicate very summarily how the analysis of a normativity internal to power is connected to one of the basic questions of political philosophy – the nature of legitimacy – as well as to a topic that has received far less attention from political philosophers – time in politics.

There is no space left for a full account of legitimacy, but it is significant how much political normativity has been discovered without mentioning legitimacy. It is also interesting to note how the analysis of a power-based normativity provides a general framework in which to fit the non-normativist account of legitimacy recently presented by Thomas Fossen. Fossen seeks an alternative for a (moral) theory of legitimacy without reducing legitimacy to factual acceptance of legitimacy. In his analysis, legitimacy has its ‘political point and purpose’ when citizens take a stance towards authorities claiming an entitlement to rule. Legitimacy ‘cannot be determined with certainty [...] or from a disengaged standpoint’; it derives from recognition by subjects during an ongoing process of ‘stance-taking’ (Fossen 2012, p. 22). The analysis of the creation of power by status function declarations in Section 2. helps us understand legitimacy as a higher level status function that requires previously imposed status functions (a government counts as legitimate if duly elected, but ‘duly elected’ is itself a status function presupposing an entire system of status functions). Understanding legitimacy as a status function explains why those seeking power are interested in legitimacy, cf. (Beetham 1991, pp. 56–63). For as PC expresses, ‘status functions are the vehicles of power in society’ (Searle 1995, p. 94).

Furthermore, our account of belief in politics in Section 3 clarifies Fossen’s notion of attributing legitimacy. Whatever our beliefs about legitimacy in general or about the legitimacy of those in power, they may be undermined by corrective remarks that we find convincing and may come from anywhere, even from people not directly involved (people not ruled by the authorities whose legitimacy is at stake). In other words: (1) depending on beliefs that are vulnerable to objections, attributions of legitimacy are as provisional as beliefs. This explains why the actual content as well as the rational standing of an attribution of legitimacy ‘are provisionally determined in eventful, temporally extended and embodied practices of stance-taking’ (Fossen 2012, p. 21). (2) Despite the absence of theoretically validated criteria, issues of legitimacy are therefore susceptible to influences that transcends the particular political community involved. In acknowledging the impact of such objections, moreover, we show ourselves to be aware of the ‘distinction between what is legitimate and what is merely taken to be legitimate’ (Fossen 2012, p. 3). Legitimacy is not just a matter of attributing legitimacy; it requires attributions that survive objections and criticism. Legitimacy must be *reproduced* or *maintained* in provisional and therefore continuous attributions of legitimacy.

An account explaining legitimacy as the provisional result of successive attributions of legitimacy enjoins us to make due allowance for temporality in our account of the normativity internal to power. In the final paragraphs of this

essay, I can only offer some general indications as to the nature and consequences of this temporality. In any event, by abandoning the hope for theories in political philosophy, we abandon the uncomplicated and static conception of political time that, as I explained in Section 1, follows from the notion of a (stably) true theory. For the sense of normativity I have presented here is contingent upon the fact that the recognition of status functions (and therefore of power and legitimacy) depends on specific beliefs held at *a specific moment* in time. Moreover, to accept a belief entails the acknowledgement that it may be challenged at any time in the future; it entails the acknowledgement of the inescapably open-ended character of the future of that belief. The power-based normativity of politics therefore puts the political agent under the unrelenting requirement to ensure that the beliefs upon which her power or legitimacy depends, survive a process that stretches through time.

Accordingly, what specific corrective remarks are impossible to ignore for a political agent *at any given time*, depends on what happens to the beliefs of her supporters at that time (their losing faith in her political character or in the policies she endorses). Such an account of normativity is not only more attentive to the passage of time. It also accommodates other temporal aspects of political normativity that are hard to acknowledge by political philosophers who put their faith in stably true theories. In concluding this essay, I can only offer a barest indication of this by sketching three quite uncontroversial examples:

*First* example: political beliefs, including beliefs motivating the recognition of power or legitimacy, are not isolated from events in political reality. Typically, political debate is sparked by events and events cast the debate in a new light, weakening or strengthening arguments for or against beliefs. As a result of certain political events, a political agent may have no choice but to answer corrective remarks which challenge the beliefs that underwrite the recognition of status functions (thereby jeopardizing power or legitimacy).

*Second* example: support for political agents is vulnerable to the retrospective assessment of their decisions. But the future in which a decision is evaluated, is itself shaped by that decision. There is no comparing the two 'futures' in order to assess the decision that brought about the 'one' future. So recognition (and therefore power and legitimacy) may be hostage to corrective remarks inspired by circumstances that are partly the consequence of the decisions by those whose power or legitimacy is at stake.

*Third* example: even if discussion may in principle resume at any moment, an issue may *in practice* be off the agenda and debate about it very difficult to revive. Alternatively, windows of opportunity may occasionally open up when arguments reinforcing or undermining beliefs receive an uncommonly sympathetic hearing. In this sense, the standing of beliefs motivating support for political agents depends on opportunities in political debate.

These admittedly hypothetical and extremely sketchy remarks not only highlight some implications of the temporal dimensions of the normativity internal to power. They enhance our awareness of legitimacy's *factual* dimension. Even though legitimacy is not merely a matter of actually existing recognition, it does depend on (beliefs motivating) recognition as actually maintained in debate stretching through time. Not only is recognition provisional; it rests on beliefs vulnerable to corrective remarks inspired by events and circumstances that are partly shaped by the exercise of power itself and dependent on fleeting opportunities for advancing arguments. By contrast, these remarks confirm the *normative* dimension of power. There is no surprise in the statement that power is affected by factual circumstances (the disappearance of opponents, shifts in converging interests, etc.). However, in the cases alluded to here, power is affected by circumstances by virtue of its *normative* nature; the circumstances influence the standing of the *beliefs* and *arguments* upon which power is dependent. The circumstances determine whether there are corrective remarks that a political agent has reasons not to ignore as well as what the content of those remarks will be.

In this sense, this temporal analysis of politics elucidates the interlacement of normative and factual considerations that we must capture in order to make sense of the role that 'power' and 'legitimacy' play in the political relation.

## Conclusion

There is a normative dimension to politics that has not received sufficient attention in political philosophy and, in particular, in the recent debate launched by the realist criticism of the dominant conception of political philosophy. This political normativity is independent of our notions of practical reason and morality as explained by a general theory as well as our understanding of politics as a specific practice concerned with distinctive political virtues and goods. This political normativity derives from the fact that political power rests on recognition and support in belief. For that fact ensures that even political agents exclusively interested in power must act in ways that represent them as being sensitive to normative considerations.

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## Notes

1. The debate started with some papers by Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss and with (Newey 2001). For an overview, see (Galston 2010, Philp 2012, Sleat 2013, chap. 2, Rossi and Sleat 2014). For recent stages of the debate, see (Rossi 2012, Erman and Möller 2013, *in press*, Jubb and Rossi 2015, *forthcoming*).
2. Just one recent example, (Estlund 2008, p. 2): ‘brute power is not a moral thing. Like a knife, it can be used rightly or wrongly. The moral questions about the use of knives are not much about the details of what knives are like, and the moral questions about the uses of power are not much about the exact nature of actual power’.
3. Corrective remarks may be appeals or guidelines for improvement or they may point out commendable cases for instructional purposes. But for ease of exposition, corrective remarks will here be limited to negative assessments.
4. But see (Heyse 2006).
5. For examples see (Philp 2007 or Sleat 2013).
6. Williams’ realism remained incomplete and was published posthumously. So interpretation is controversial. Nevertheless I do not believe this applies to what is mentioned here. See (Sleat 2010, Bavister-Gould 2014, Hall *in press*).
7. However he does, at least sometimes, evoke a non-moral, almost Wittgensteinian interpretation; it is the principle to accept if you play the language game of politics or if you count a group within society not as enemies in war but as ‘subjects of the state’, (Williams 2005, p. 5, See also Hall *in press*).
8. This applies also to the interesting analysis in (Beetham 1991).
9. In this context the Machiavellian appeal to the notion of ‘glory’ is revealing, cf. (Geuss 2005b, Philp 2007): the ambition for glory is not (totally) unselfish, but it is not identical to an ambition for power either. For (Jubb and Rossi 2015, *forthcoming*) the distinction between politics and domination is conceptual and hence non-moral. This border on the claim that the distinction is self-evident for all reasonable agents but it certainly does not explain why the distinction is of interest to political agents.
10. (Erman and Möller *in press*, pp. 9–10): ‘To our knowledge, political realists have given little in the way of an unambiguous characterization of [the political and moral domains]’.
11. (Searle 1995, pp. 39–40, Searle 2006, p. 17). Comparison is with n. 2.
12. For this distinction, see (Finlay 2010, p. 334).
13. To be sure, what a political agent is concerned with is the publicly available representations of herself, her political action and her reaction to corrective remarks. But in many circumstances this ensures that these remarks effectively influence her actions (a patriotic politician cannot ignore publicly available criticisms of her patriotism all the time). This trend is similar to what Jon Elster has called the civilizing force of hypocrisy, only here the force need not be civilizing as there is no guarantee that the political agent derives her power from promoting policies that merit being called civilized.
14. Here I am indebted to Glen Newey. Compare also (Markell 2003, pp. 39–45, 48–49, 58–59).
15. This complaint may take inspiration from some considerations of Williams introducing his ‘critical theory test’, (Williams 2002, pp. 219–232, Williams 2005, p. 5).
16. Compare (Williams 1973, p. 148).

### Notes on contributor

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